

CHICAGO TRIBUNE
3 February 1986ARTICLE APPEARED
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FILE ONLY

Korean spy case chills Downstate college

By Rogers Worthington

A gossamer web of connections between four former Western Illinois University students, an emigre political science professor there and a Korean newspaper publisher in New York City are part of the intrigue and controversy surrounding death sentences meted out by a South Korean court two weeks ago.

Two of the former students, Dong Hua Yang and Seong Man Kim, were sentenced to death on espionage charges Jan. 20 in Seoul. A third student, Tae Kwon Hwang, was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Details of the trial, including their pleas and the evidence against them, have not been made public. But in a pretrial account in the Korea Herald, the official South Korean government newspaper, prosecutors charged that Yang and Kim directed a South Korean student group in carrying out "antistate activities" on behalf of North Korea.

According to the account and a South Korean government spokesman in Washington, Yang, Kim and Hwang and the fourth former WIU student, Chang Sin Lee, were recruited by a North Korean agent living on New York's Long Island.

Although other Korean student protesters have been accused of being North Korean operatives, this is the first time Koreans who studied in the United States have been named and the first time since 1977 that student protesters have been sentenced to death, according to Korean observers in the U.S.

News of the sentences launched a flurry of protest letters to South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan. Amnesty International in London and the Washington-based North American Coalition for Human Rights in Korea charge the sentences are a government attempt to discredit the South Korean student protest movement and to discourage Koreans living abroad from political activities critical of their government.

While the international response continues, a chill has set in among the 130 Korean students studying at Western Illinois University in Macomb.

"We are all afraid of the

Korean government now," said one student, who like others contacted would speak only if his name was not published.

Macomb is a college town about 200 miles southwest of Chicago where in 1982 and 1983, the three sentenced students studied, grappled with English and complained privately about their government before moving on to New York City and eventually back to South Korea.

It was in South Korea that Yang, 27, allegedly led a student break-in last June of a reserve officers training corps office in Kwang Ju province; that Kim, 28, was charged with distributing "seditious printed materials to colleges and universities" and financing students who seized the U.S. Information Service office in Seoul; and that Hwang, 30, allegedly taught other students how to produce anti-government leaflets, according to the Korea Herald account. All were arrested in June.

A South Korean government spokesman in Washington charged that Yang, Kim, Hwang and Lee received indoctrination and training from the New York-based North Korean agent, whom he identified as Chung Kyun Suh, 48. Yang and Kim also allegedly received training and money from other North Korean agents in East Germany, Hungary and North Korea, according to the government newspaper account.

Lee, 30, the fourth former WIU student, was also named as a North Korean agent recruited by Suh. He lives in New York City, where he works as a taxi driver and is a television production student at the Center for Media Arts.

Lee is a former Chicago resident, whose family immigrated to Chicago 11 years ago, and an applicant for U.S. citizenship. He vigorously denies the charges and said he plans to sue the Korea Herald for libel.

The Seoul newspaper describes him as leading Kim, Hwang and Yang in study sessions of North Korean President Kim Il Sung's doctrine of self-reliance. The newspaper also says that while at Western Illinois University, he organized showings of television news documentaries about the 1980 Kwang Ju riot-massacre, when hundreds of South Koreans were killed in a confrontation with troops during a demonstration protesting the arrest of opposition leader Kim Dae Jung.

Yang, a pre-engineering student, and Kim and Hwang, both graduate students in political science, left WIU in February, 1983, according to university records. A friend said they were exhausted from studying and frustrated from trying to learn English. After his graduation, Lee later shared a New York apartment with the three.

"These students did not stand out," said Robert Gabler, director of international programs at the university. "If there had been anything going on, we would have known it."

Recalled one Korean student: "They were common people. Good students. They are against government, that's it. Not good, not bad."

All four students were known to WIU political science Prof. Jai Huyen Lee. In 1973, when then-President Park Chung Hee replaced the South Korean constitution with his own charter, Lee, then a member of the Korean diplomatic corps, resigned in protest as chief press and cultural attache with the South Korean Embassy in Washington.

Prof. Lee, a longtime critic of human rights violations in South Korea, said he believes Yang, Hwang and Kim may have been singled out because of him. He sees the espionage charges as fabrications meant to coincide with a government crackdown on a widening wave of student protest.

But others say Yang, Kim and Hwang were vulnerable because they had been out of the country and had been part of an isolated protest group in Kwang Ju with no connection to larger student groups or opposition parties in Seoul. Yang's expulsion from Chon Nam University in Kwang Ju during the 1980 student-riot massacre there also may have contributed.

Not long after their arrival in New York, Yang took a job as a taxicab traffic controller at Kennedy International Airport, according to Chang Sin Lee. Hwang enrolled and completed two years of study at the New School for Social Research, said a spokesman for the school. Kim returned to Korea after a few months in New York.

But before he left, the four were said to have made contact with Chung Kyun Suh, the man South Korean Embassy officials in Washington claim persuaded the four to become North Korean agents.

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